



The Taliban

An Organizational Analysis

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The views reflected in this article are the authors' own. They do not reflect the official opinions or policy of either the U.S. Army or the Pakistan Army.

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PHOTO: The Taliban flag displays the Shahadah, the Islamic creed, which is the Muslim declaration of belief in the oneness of God and acceptance of Muhammad as his final prophet.

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

—Sun Tzu¹

ONE OF THE MOST WIDELY RECOGNIZED IMAGES of the present day is that of airplanes hitting the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. The terrorist organization Al-Qaeda and its host, the Taliban in Afghanistan, became household names all over the world on that fateful day. The media started churning out stories about the brutalities of the Taliban, and the world discovered a new monster.

The Taliban did not grow out of the dark overnight, nor was it unknown in the Middle East, the region of the world most severely affected after 9/11. Following its emergence in 1994 from madrassas, the Taliban achieved surprising victories over its enemies and assumed rule over much of Afghanistan.² Simultaneously hailed as saviors and feared as oppressors, the Taliban were an almost mythical phenomenon that seemed to embody the very essence of Afghan cultural beliefs, especially revenge for transgression, hospitality for enemies, and readiness to die for honor. The Taliban knew the Afghan people and their ways and embedded themselves in the complex Afghan web of tribalism, religion, and ethnicity.

Despite their quick overthrow in 2002 by a small coalition of U.S. forces and anti-Taliban groups, the Taliban has not gone away. In fact, today, in the face of thousands of NATO and U.S. troops, a growing Afghan National Army (ANA), and a popularly elected government, the movement's influence in Afghanistan is increasing. It continues to wage an insurgency that has prevented the new government from establishing legitimacy, and it has created massive unrest in Pakistan. Clearly, it behooves us to know something more about this archaic but formidable enemy.

History

Today's Taliban has been shaped by a host of influences and events:

- Afghanistan's ancient warrior culture.
- The 1979 Soviet invasion and the mujahideen who fought against it.
- The civil war and warlordism that followed the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989.

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- Madrassa religious ideology.
- The Taliban's initial acceptance as the hope of peace for a war-weary people.
- The movement's downfall in 2002.
- The ongoing insurgency.³

The Taliban is comprised mostly of Sunni Muslim Pashtuns. Historically, this largest Afghan ethnic group occupied a great swath of land from central western Afghanistan through much of the south and up the country's eastern border. The region has a long history of invaders who tried, mostly in vain, to overpower the Pashtuns. Since Alexander in 326 B.C., many foreign military forces have entered Afghanistan, among them Persians, Scythians, Kushans, Sakas, Huns, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, British, Russians, and most recently, Americans and their NATO allies.⁴

Fiercely independent, the Pashtuns have always defended their homeland against foreign interlopers. No outside power has ever been able to subdue them completely.⁵ They defeated most of their would-be conquerors outright or absorbed them into their tribes through the centuries. The Pashtuns adapted to the military strategies of their invaders, and then utilized their new tactics and equipment to fight among themselves until confronted by another external threat. This military orientation has shaped the Pashtun—and Taliban—outlook: "*A Pashtun is never at peace, except when he is at war.*"⁶ The Pashtuns are inclined not to accept any form of strict authority, even at the cost of discord and insecurity.⁷

The "Great Game" in the 19th century helped shape the current political landscape of the Pashtun region.⁸ It also gave the Pashtuns their first encounters with a modern military power, during the three Anglo-Afghan Wars (1839, 1878, and 1919). After unsuccessful attempts to gain headway inside Afghanistan, Russia and Britain agreed to create a buffer between their zones of influence. Because of provisions for easement rights, the 1893 international boundary between British India and Afghanistan, the Durand Line, did not affect Afghans with strong ethnic and family connections to Pashtuns living across the border. The British gave semiautonomous status to the tribes on the British-India side of the border by creating the tribal agencies, which morphed into the Pakistani Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) after their independence.⁹

Pashtun areas generally remained quiet until the last quarter of the 20th century, when the relative stability that Afghanistan knew under Zahir Shah's four-decade rule ended (1973). The unsteadiness that ensued was the catalyst for the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to overthrow the government in 1978. Afghanistan's conservative religious elements, led by *mujahideen*, resisted the new regime's radical reform package, which brought about new taxes, drastic changes in land ownership, compulsory education for women, and female participation in nontraditional roles in society.¹⁰

The Soviet Union deployed troops into Afghanistan in December 1979 to aid its communist ally against Islamist militias and to counter the threat of radical Islamists gaining power in Muslim Central Asian republics along the Soviet Union's soft underbelly.¹¹ This action fueled the mujahideen resistance and calls for jihad. In response, the Soviet military waged a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. In nearly 10 years of occupation, Soviet forces and their Afghan communist allies reportedly killed 1.3 million Afghans, destroyed the infrastructure in urban and rural areas of the country, and caused 5.5 million Afghans to flee to refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. (Most of them found their way to the tribal belt of Pakistan.)¹²

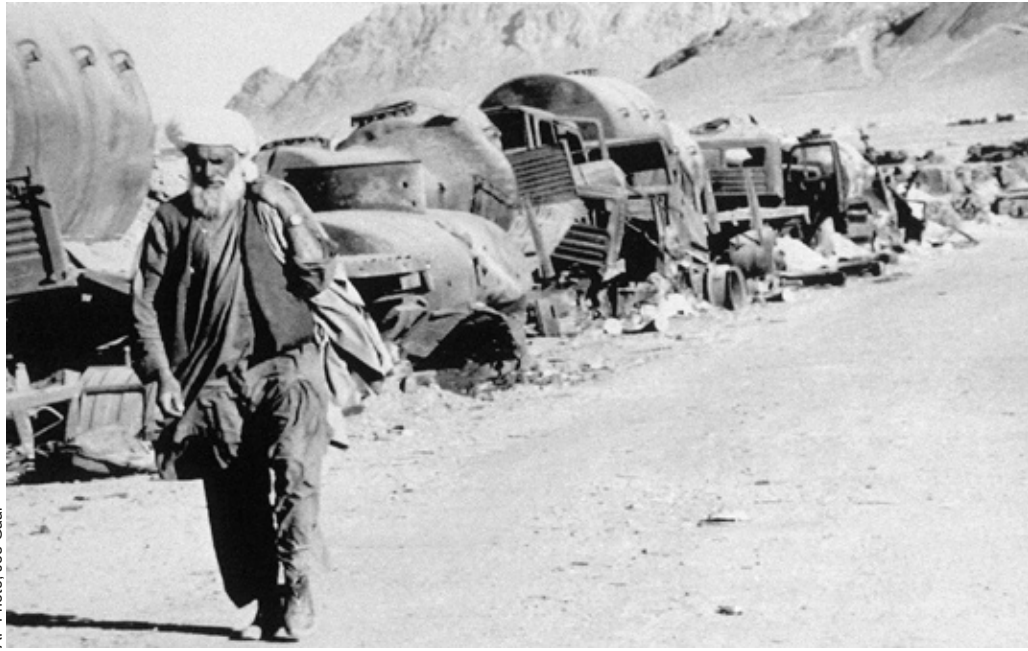
Despite heavy investments in men and materiel, the Soviets were never able to gain unopposed access to the countryside, especially in the Pashtun region, where urban areas and government centers, virtually under siege by the mujahideen, were only occasionally penetrated by the Soviets (and then only in massive operations).¹³ In February 1989, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. Six months before they left, the Soviets handed over huge caches of weapons and ammunition to government forces. They continued to provide materiel support for two years after their departure, but their withdrawal essentially left the government to fend for itself. A civil war followed, resulting in the communist government stepping down in April 1992. Differences among the mujahideen parties quickly revealed themselves. Each faction had a leader or warlord with aspirations for power. Fighting broke out, leading to widespread looting and rapine. Strife between the warlords and a war-weary population led to an environment that allowed the Taliban's radical ideas to take hold.¹⁴

The core of the Taliban grew from the Pashtun refugee camps, mostly in Pakistan, where a modified and selectively interpreted version of Wahhabist Islam influenced some madrassa students (*talib*) to adopt an ultraconservative approach to social issues and politics.¹⁵ Theological students fighting for professed rights and freedoms are not a new phenomenon in the region, and these talibs, now formally calling themselves the Taliban, presented themselves as righteous religious students on the march for peace.¹⁶ The Taliban's claims resonated with the Pashtun people, and their popularity spread rapidly.

In November 1994, the Taliban seized control of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. They gained de facto religious legitimacy among the rural Pashtuns when their leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, wore the sacred cloak of Prophet Muhammad in front of a public gathering and declared himself "Leader of the Faithful" (*Amir-ul-Momineen*).¹⁷ This event, arguably the most important milestone in the Taliban's history, allowed Omar to claim his right to "lead not just all Afghans, but all Muslims."¹⁸ It provided the movement with a charismatic leader who was thereafter able to draw upon the mysticism inherent in Pashtun culture.¹⁹

The Taliban made rapid military progress and by 1997 controlled 95 percent of the country.²⁰ Despite initial euphoria, the group gradually lost the support of the international community and the Afghan populace because it strictly enforced its extremist version of Islamic law. The Taliban banned television, music, and dancing; prohibited women from attending school and working outside the home; carried out atrocities against Afghanistan's non-Sunni population; and allegedly supported militant Sunni sectarian groups in Pakistan. Mullah Omar also interacted with Osama bin-Laden, and the Taliban hosted Al-Qaeda training camps and leaders in areas under their control.

Omar's refusal to extradite Bin-Laden after 9/11 triggered Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which



AP Photo, Joe Gaal

An Afghan man passes by a line of abandoned Soviet military vehicles near Asadabad, Afghanistan, 24 December 1989, 10 months after the Russian withdrawal from the country.

led to the rapid collapse of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Many Taliban fighters assimilated into Afghan society, while the leaders went underground to emerge later as the core of an insurgency. The war-ravaged population's unmet expectations and non-Pashtun dominance of the central government at Kabul gave the insurgency impetus.

In Pakistan's FATA and North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Pashtuns sympathetic to the Taliban have been at odds with Pakistan security forces. During the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U.S. used the FATA as launching pads for sponsored mujahideen, making the tribal areas a hotbed for extremism. The sprouting of madrassas, an abundance of modern weaponry, and an influx of Afghan refugees radicalized the environment. After the Soviets departed, many foreign mujahideen (mostly Arabs) settled in the FATA and were absorbed into tribes through marriage. Due to ethnic, religious, ideological, and cultural affinities, the area's residents viewed the Taliban's rise favorably. After 9/11 and OEF, radical elements in the FATA mobilized some support for the Taliban and started targeting the Pakistani government because of its support to OEF. Pakistan has since deployed over 100,000 troops to different parts of the FATA to counter militants with similar operational signatures loosely aligned with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Recently, Taliban

sympathizers in Pakistan joined forces to form an umbrella organization called Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban Movement). They appointed Baitullah Mehsud as their leader.²¹

Culture

Culture is probably the most important factor in the counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan. “Wars,” Michael Howard has opined, “are not tactical exercises writ large . . . They are . . . conflicts of societies, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them.”²² The Taliban presence is most evident in Pashtun areas. According to Thomas Johnson, director of the Naval Postgraduate School’s Program for Culture and Conflict Studies, “While it would be incorrect to refer to the Taliban insurrection or resurrection as merely a Pashtun affair, it would not be far from the mark.”²³

Pashtun culture depends greatly on the *Pashtunwali* code of honor, which predates Islam and is specific to the Pashtuns.²⁴ A Pashtun “must adhere [to] the code to maintain his honor [and] to retain his identity as a Pashtun.”²⁵ Those violating the code are subject to the verdict of a *jirga*.²⁶ Some of the more important facets of the code include—

- *Nang* (honor). A tribesman is obliged to employ every means possible to shield and protect his honor and the honor of his family. The honor of a Pashtun rests on a host of small rules and customs, which, if infringed, demand a restoration of honor even at the cost of one’s life.

- *Badal* (revenge). When someone kills a family member or violates the honor of a woman in the family, revenge is necessary to restore honor. It often leads to a killing. This revenge can occur immediately or generations later if the family whose honor has been violated is in a weak position when the infraction occurs. The Taliban has used *badal* to recruit new fighters after civilian deaths caused by coalition bombings and “hard-knock operations.”²⁷

- *Melmastia* (hospitality). Hospitality and protection must be offered to all visitors without expectation of remuneration or favor. Any Pashtun who can gain access to the house of another Pashtun can claim asylum there, regardless of the previous relationship between the two parties.²⁸ The Taliban use *melmastia* to obtain food and shelter when they travel within the Pashtun belt.

- *Nanawatay* (to seek forgiveness). To preempt *badal*, the code allows Pashtuns to seek forgiveness from those whom one has wronged. The offending party goes to the house of their enemy to beg forgiveness and make peace with him. *Nanawatay* is the only alternative to *badal*. The Taliban does not emphasize *nanawatay*; it exhorts aggrieved persons to join the insurgency to restore their honor or avenge the death of family members.

- *Hamsaya* (“one who shares the same shadow”). *Hamsaya* is servitude in return for protection from stronger tribes or provision of some goods. For example, it could entail an exchange of military service for land. This practice explains why tribes quickly follow whomever is strongest. It also explains how the Taliban consolidated power so quickly in the 1990s.²⁹

Although rivals, Pashtun tribes rally against outsiders if threatened. They are politically well informed and will use alliances and counter-alliances to their advantage—as in the present war. As the *Christian Science Monitor* has noted, “The rules of this war are a far cry from the easy slogans of ‘you’re either with us or against us.’ Indeed, Pashtun history is filled with heroes who played both sides for the benefit of tribe, family, and honor.”³⁰

Religion

The Taliban rely chiefly upon religion to sway the Afghan people, 99 percent of whom are Muslim (80 percent Sunni, 19 percent Shi’a).³¹ In the Afghan Islamic tradition, the core religion is combined with pre-Islamic beliefs and the tribal customs of *Pashtunwali*.³² The Taliban have further transformed the tradition with an ultraconservative interpretation of Islam.

The distinctiveness of their religious ideology arose from the madrassas founded during the Soviet-Afghan war. With Saudi Arabian support, many schools shifted to an orthodox brand of Islam, one that follows a Salafist egalitarian model and stringently enforces compliance.³³ In Ahmed Rashid’s words, “The Taliban represented nobody but themselves and they recognized no Islam except their own.”³⁴ The majority of Afghans did not want to follow this new version of Islam, but harsh enforcement by the Taliban gave them little choice.

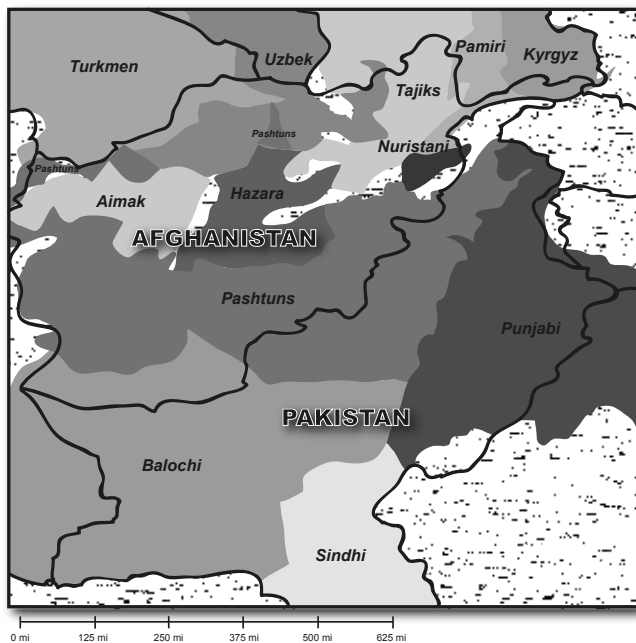


Figure 1. Tribal areas, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ethnicity

Afghanistan is 42 percent Pashtun, 27 percent Tajik, 9 percent Hazara, 9 percent Uzbek, 4 percent Aimak, 3 percent Turkmen, 2 percent Balochi, and 4 percent other.³⁵

There are even more Pashtuns in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, and most live in the border

areas—the FATA and NWFP. Although obscure genealogies, myths and folklore, historical alliances, and conflicts make it extremely difficult to draw dividing lines, there are five major tribal groups: the Durrani, Ghilzai, Karlanri, Sarbani, and Ghurghusht. The Durrani and the Ghilzai are the two most influential.³⁶

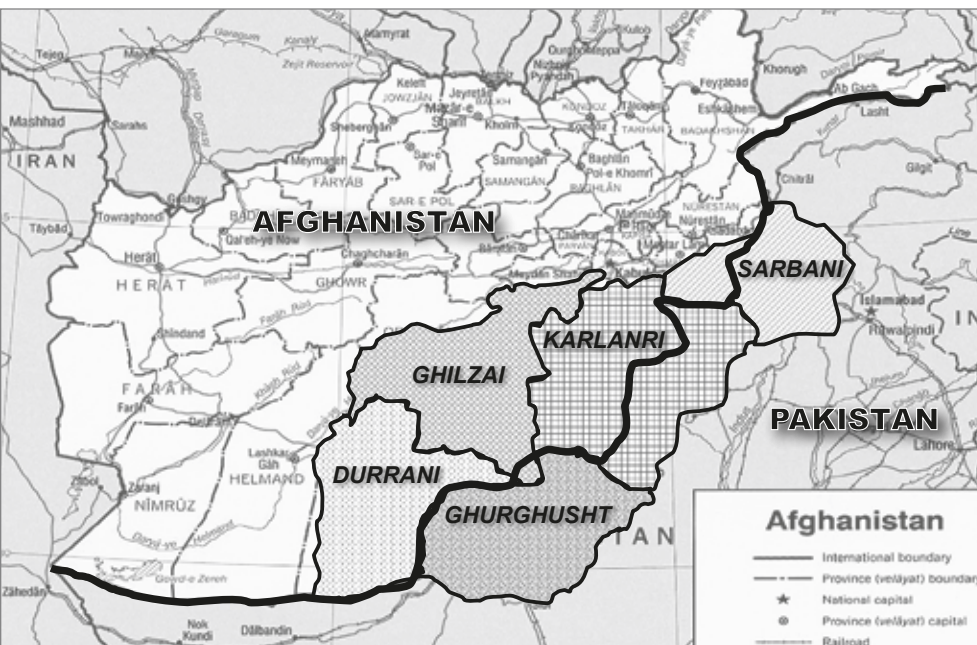
Durrani. The Durrani tribal confederation, mostly concentrated in southeast Afghanistan, has traditionally provided leadership in the Pashtun areas since Ahmad Shah Durrani founded a monarchy in 1747. Afghans regard Ahmad Shah as the founder of modern Afghanistan because he united the factional tribes. The current president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, is a Durrani.

Ghilzais. The Ghilzai tribal group is concentrated mostly in eastern Afghanistan and has historically been an archrival of the Durrani. Some of the major Taliban leaders today, including Mullah Omar, are Ghilzais.³⁷ The Ghilzais are part of a relatively obscure tribal confederation known as the Bitanis.³⁸

Karlanris. The Karlanris, or “hill tribes,” are the third largest group of Pashtuns.³⁹ They straddle the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan in Waziristan, Kurram, Peshawar, Khost, Paktia, and Paktika.⁴⁰

Sarbani. Although geographically separated, two major groups make up the Sarbani. The larger group, located north of Peshawar, includes tribes such as the Mohmands, Yusufzais, and Shinwaris, while the smaller segment consists of Sheranis and Tarins scattered in northern Balochistan.⁴¹ This faction comprises the traditional aristocracy of the Pashtun.

Ghurghushts. The last major tribal group is the Ghurghusht. They are found mostly in northern Balochistan and include tribes such as the Kakars, Mandokhels, Panars, and Musa Khel. Some of the groups’ sub-tribes, like the Gaduns and Safis, can also be found in the NWFP.⁴²



NOTE: Adapted from Johnson and Mason, *Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan*.

Figure 2. Location of major Pashtun tribal groups.

Resources

The Taliban can access a full range of resources, from labor to technology. The primary resources examined here include religious allies, human terrain, and the opium trade.⁴³

Religious allies. Amid a myriad of transcontinental terrorists, Al-Qaeda particularly gives the Taliban a religious cause and some legitimacy, assists the Taliban information-warfare effort, and provides the movement money, personnel (foreign fighters), technology (advanced improvised explosive devices—IEDs—and communications), and tactical training support. Tehreek-i-Nifaz-i-shariat-i-Muhammadi, a group in the FATA and the NWFP's Swat regions, is another strong Taliban sympathizer. Also supporting or at least coordinating with the Taliban are the Central Asian Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and a number of other, smaller, militant bands.

Some of the madrassas in the Pashtun belt teach a violent version of Islamic ideology that mixes ethnic and religious sentiments. These schools are good recruiting grounds for the Taliban. Mohammed Ali Siddiqi, a madrasa expert, explains the phenomenon as “an accident of history”: “The leadership

of the Islamic movement has fallen to the Pashtuns as they had resisted the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan successfully. Then the Pashtun Taliban triumphed [in Afghanistan]. . . . Since the madrassas had played a prominent role in the anti-Soviet jihad, they acquired a reputation both as recruiting grounds for mujahideen and as centers of learning.”⁴⁴

Human terrain. This asset is crucial to the success or failure of the Taliban insurgency. Simply put, an uprising cannot maintain itself without the support of the people. The Pashtuns, rendered vulnerable by what they perceive to be a lack of influence in the Kabul government, have been more amenable to the Taliban lately. Moreover, “Pashtun suspicions and mistrust of the government were further heightened by the Afghan Transitional Authority's inability to protect Pashtuns from the wave of human rights abuses perpetrated by insurgents and warlords since the fall of the Taliban.”⁴⁵ Thus, the approximately 28 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan contribute recruits, support personnel, money, weapons, and an intelligence network to the Taliban insurgency.⁴⁶ They also provide superb real-time intelligence on most troop movements, allowing Taliban fighters to flee when outnumbered or to set-up ambushes and IEDs when the odds are better. With more than

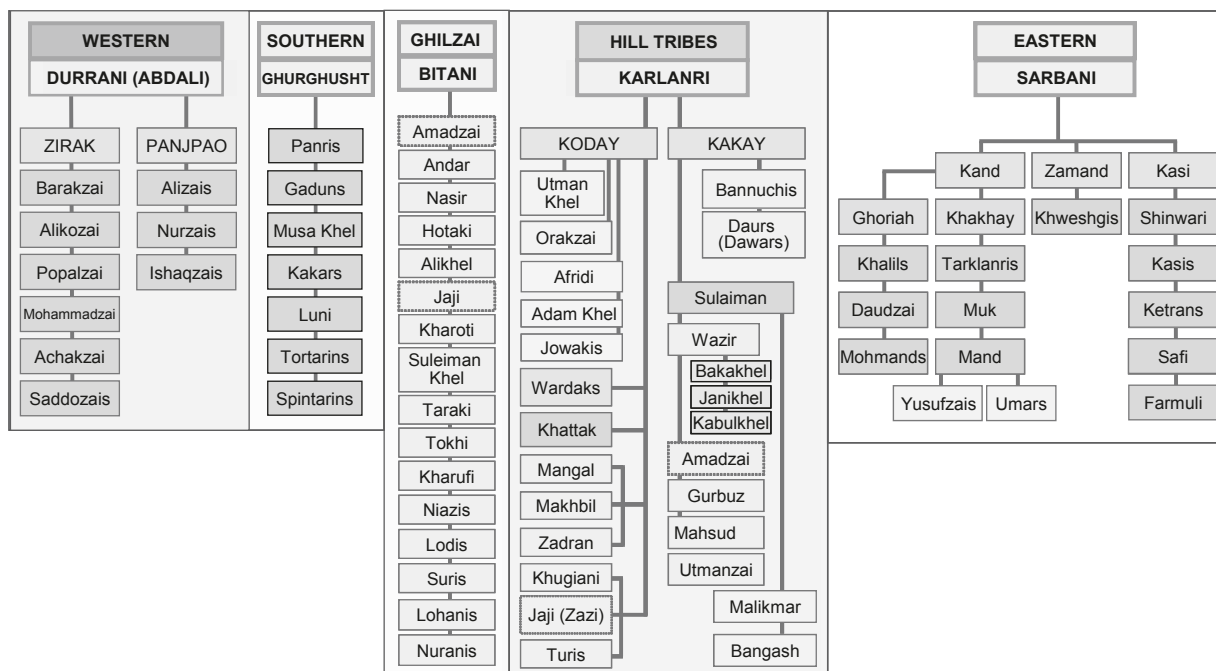


Figure 3. Pashtun tribal groups and sub-tribes.

two generations of war-hardened inhabitants to draw from, the Taliban recruit experienced fighters who know the terrain and can survive in the harsh environment. An added bonus is the ordnance the mujahideen cached throughout the country during the Afghan-Soviet war, the subsequent civil war, and the Taliban's consolidation of power.

Drug revenue. The Taliban's last key resource is the illegal drug trade, which provides revenue and other benefits. With improved irrigation and more rain, Afghanistan has virtually become a narco-state.⁴⁷ The record 2006 opium harvest was worth over \$3 billion.⁴⁸ The 2007 estimates are even higher. Afghanistan currently produces 93 percent of the world's opium—almost one-half of Afghanistan's gross domestic product comes from this trade.⁴⁹ The exact amount the Taliban receives from it is unclear, but they tax farmers, landowners, and drug traffickers. While the group initially vowed to eliminate opium, they look to it now as a necessary evil to further their cause: not only does it generate funds for the insurgency, but it poisons the decadent West, especially Europe, which gets 90 percent of its heroin from Afghanistan. The drug traffickers and the Taliban help each other with weapons, personnel, and money, all to destabilize the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IROA).

Physical Terrain

The physical terrain on which the Taliban, their sympathizers, and coalition forces operate is harsh. Afghanistan and the FATA comprise over 250,000 square miles, more than 70 percent of which is a mountainous mix of arid plateaus, thickly forested mountains, and craggy valleys.⁵⁰ Only 12 percent of the land is arable.

Southern and western Afghanistan are mostly desert except for the Helmand River area.⁵¹ Lines of communication infrastructure are either underdeveloped or virtually nonexistent. Roads align with watersheds and valleys and pass through deep gorges that for centuries have been the sites of murderous ambushes by local warriors. Built on defendable vantage points, houses are generally well fortified. It is extremely difficult to control access routes to towns, villages, and the population in such a difficult landscape. Multiple pockets of inaccessible space governed through tribal law allow militants freedom of maneuver while making conventional military operations ineffective and

expensive in terms of troops and resources. In short, the terrain is conducive to insurgent activities.⁵² Like the region's culture, the rugged geography remains virtually unaffected by time. Afghanistan is "a place where the land fashions the people, rather than the people fashioning the land."⁵³

Strategy

According to Thomas H. Johnson, "What the Taliban wants is a return to its pre-9/11 status. . . . The Taliban are driven by two competing interests: the desire to re-conquer Afghanistan and the desire to reestablish a caliphate. The first is Pashtun-centric, the second more Al-Qaeda-inspired."⁵⁴

The Taliban's insurgency strategy is one of patience. They are conducting a classic "war of the flea," aimed at causing their enemy to suffer the "dog's disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough[,]...the dog succumbs to exhaustion. . . ."⁵⁵ An often quoted Taliban axiom is "The Americans may have the watches, but we have the time."⁵⁶ Their plan has four aims, or phases:

- Mobilize the religious public in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Rally the Pashtun tribes through the Pashtunwali code and religious ideology and by emphasizing the Pashtuns' subjugation by a predominantly non-Pashtun government in Kabul.
- Build up confidence in their organization while simultaneously attacking the legitimacy of the IROA, coalition forces, and the Government of Pakistan.⁵⁷
- Once the Western "crusaders" are expelled by military means or withdraw due to lack of political will, control eastern and southern Afghanistan and then push for influence in western Pakistan—establishing their version of an Islamic state.⁵⁸

Structure

The Taliban have different organizational structures at different tiers in their hierarchy. Before 9/11, the group operated in a conventional, centralized manner at its top and middle levels. However, during insurgent activities, the organization becomes flatter and gives local commanders more independence, so that they can adapt to the demands of a complex environment and benefit from dispersing their forces into small units.⁵⁹ (See figure 4.)

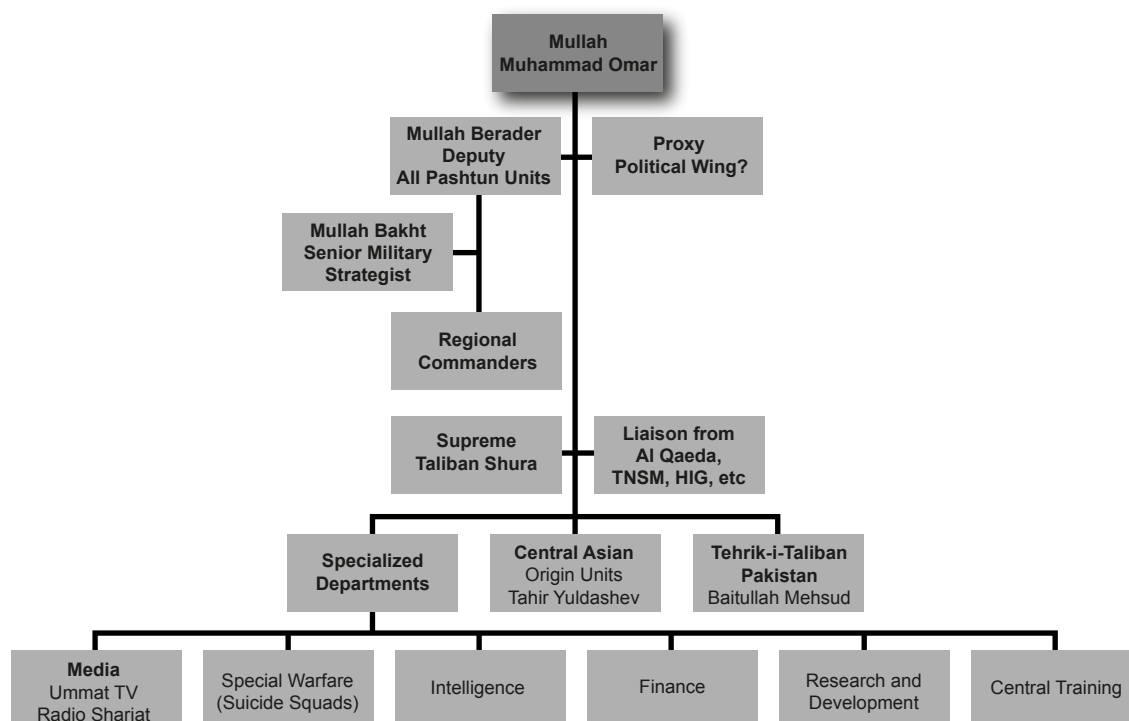


Figure 4. An organizational diagram of the Taliban.

Specialized departments at the Taliban's top and middle tiers include suicide squads, media outlets like Ummat Studios and Radio Shariat, and specialized training outfits imparting the technical skills to develop IEDs. Other departments provide a centralized pool of special skills.

The Taliban organization is a network of franchises, an arrangement that fits well with tribal traditions. A small militant group begins calling itself "the local Taliban." It gains some form of recognition from the central Taliban hierarchy in return for its support and cooperation. The new cell

supports Taliban grand strategy, but retains local freedom of action. This modus operandi preserves tribal loyalties and territorial boundaries.

A typical Taliban village cell has between 10 and 50 part-time fighters and a smattering of ideologically motivated persons and mercenaries from other areas. The cell runs its own intelligence collection, logistics, and population-control activities with coordination and support from other cells. Cell configurations vary with the environment. Essentially performing most tasks independently, the cell has a reciprocal relationship with other Taliban cells

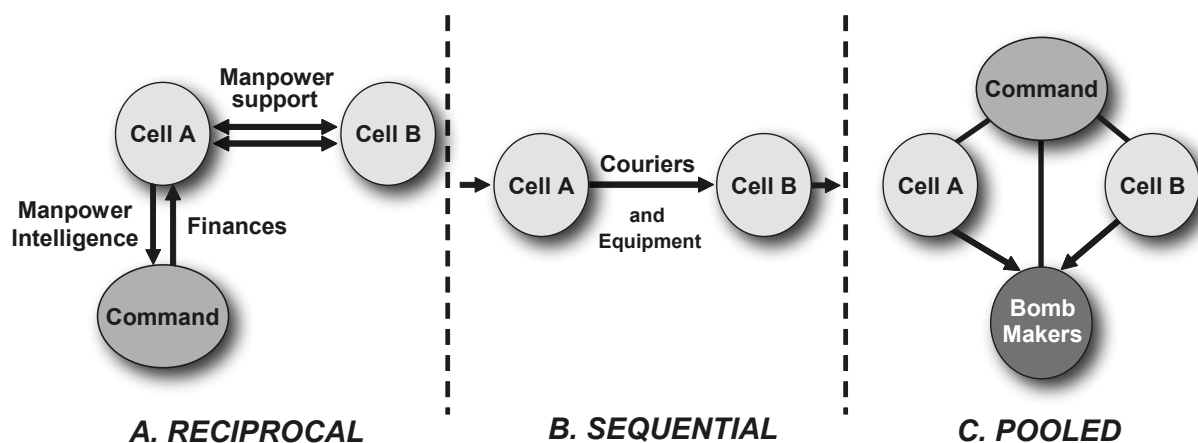


Figure 5. Forms of interdependence in the Taliban.

for physical and intelligence support; sequential interdependence for passage of information and couriers, equipment, and sometimes finances; and pooled interdependence with the higher hierarchy for media operations, IED-making, technical intelligence collection, specialized training, and additional financial support.

Leadership. The Taliban acknowledge Mullah Omar as their leader. The charismatic Omar is assisted by the Supreme Taliban Shura, the Taliban's version of a board of governors.⁶⁰ Mullah Dadullah, for example, had military responsibilities in addition

to being a member of the *shura*. The original (2003) members of the shura reportedly included Jalaluddin Haqqani, Saifur Rahman Mansoor, Mullah Dadullah (replaced by Mullah Bakht),⁶¹ Akhtar Mohammad Osmani, Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, Mullah Obaidullah, Hafiz Abdul Majeed, Mullah Mohammad Rasul, Mullah Barodar, and Mullah Abdur Razzaq Akhundzada.⁶² Most of them are also regional military commanders or military advisors.

At regional and local levels, leadership roles can become ambiguous when different leaders struggle for influence. The Taliban has reportedly instituted



NOTE: This depiction of regional areas is for illustration only and does not represent the actual territorial boundaries of the supposed Taliban commanders.

Figure 6. Supposed regional Taliban leadership.

a process that designates a regional leader and provides him with an elaborate command structure to coordinate and control operations.⁶³ Designated regional commanders control sub-commands along territorial or tribal boundaries, as well as functional divisions. (See figure 6.)

Decision-making. The Taliban's top leaders behave in an authoritarian manner, outlining policy decisions, although Mullah Omar, once known for micromanagement, has been forced by the operational environment to adopt a less intrusive style of leadership. The Taliban's middle and lower tier leaders are more informal. They generally rely on consensus in a *jirga* to maintain their support. Clergy and tribal elders usually vet decisions to elicit the support of the populace.

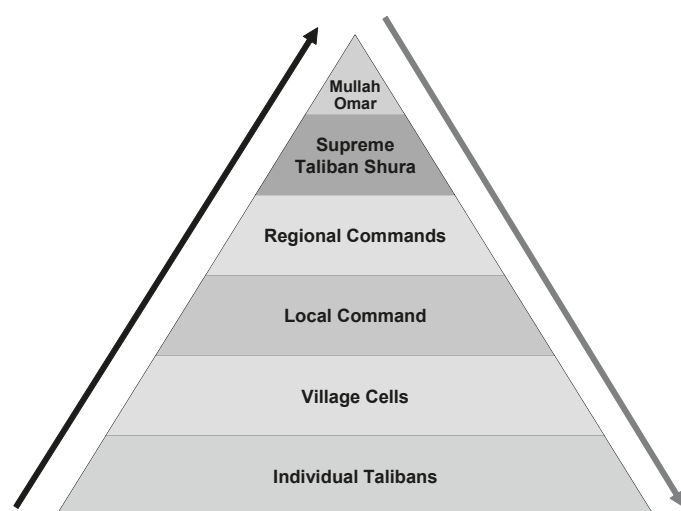
Coordination and communication. On the ground, the Taliban insurgency is a decentralized, loosely run affair. The Supreme Shura carries out strategic planning, issues directives to regional commanders, and disseminates the directives to village cells as *fatwas*, or decrees. The village cell acts in a semi-independent manner with minimum control from above. While they follow the Supreme Shura's policies, cell leaders plan and conduct activities based on the regional situation and incentives or dangers for the group.

A regional or local Taliban leader's span of control depends on the nature of the tasks ahead. For routine tasks, links and reporting relationships

resemble a traditional hierarchical pyramid where information passes vertically (figure 7a). However, in a coordinated operation, network features come into play, and the Taliban passes information and support horizontally, vertically, or diagonally (figure 7b), with remarkable speed and efficiency—disrupting a few communication channels does not slow the passage. The Taliban has also successfully used network swarming tactics, in which small units converge on specific targets and then disperse.⁶⁴

To relay sensitive verbal or written messages, the Taliban use couriers.⁶⁵ The courier network relies on tribal links and loyalties for speed and security. The Taliban use short-range radios for tactical communications and employ an extensive code system. Some Taliban cells in Pakistan use the Internet for propaganda purposes and to communicate in settled areas. *Nameh-i-shab* (night letters), usually “declarations of intent” for population control, are another form of Taliban communication.⁶⁶

Recruitment and training. The Taliban do not have a formal recruitment process. They draw new recruits from among madrasa students and local tribal youths motivated by the appeal of glamour, feelings of revenge, financial incentives, and religious beliefs. The local cell is the recruiting hub. Recruitment exploits family and clan loyalties, tribal lineage, personal friendships, social networks, madrasa alumni circles, and shared interests.



A. Typical reporting and direction for policy decisions



B. Reporting and direction for conduct of coordinated operations

Figure 7. Taliban linkages, coordination, and reporting mechanisms.

After innocent Afghans suffer collateral damage in coalition operations, the desire for badal prompts an influx of recruits. To boost recruiting efforts, the Taliban often uses its fighters as bait to induce violent U.S. and NATO responses.⁶⁷

Because almost everyone in Pashtun tribal society is armed, recruits usually possess basic military skills. They receive significant on-the-job training and must prove their military ability in a peer-review system similar to those routinely employed in Pashtun tribes. Brave, pious, and politically sound recruits gain prominence within a cell. Soon, they either become its leader or depart to form a new cell of their own.

Motivation. The Taliban seek congruence among their members' personal motivations, the cell's interests, and the organization's objectives. Seth Jones has described the two main motivations behind the Taliban insurgency:

The top tier of the Taliban leadership structure and key commanders . . . are motivated by their interpretation [of] radical Islam, and see the insurgency as a fight with Western infidels, and the West's "puppet government" in Kabul.

The bottom tier includes thousands of local fighters and their support network. The Taliban pays young men from rural villages to set up roadside bombs, launch rockets and mortars at NATO and Afghan forces, or pick up a gun for a few days. Most are not ideologically committed to *jihad*. Rather, they are motivated because they are unemployed, disenchanted with the lack of change since 2001, or angry because a local villager was killed or wounded by Afghan, U.S., or NATO forces.⁶⁸

The Taliban persuade their recruits to act in accordance with the organization's wishes by offering monetary rewards to people driven by money, status to people seeking power, and a sense of glamour to the adventurous who seek glory in tribal society. They also punish those found wanting by withholding money, reducing their status in the organization, subjecting them or their kin to physical violence, and alienating them from the tribal community.

The Taliban also have a loosely defined code of conduct, which they expect their fighters and commanders to follow. In December 2007, the Taliban

issued a code of conduct (*layeha*) to communicate the organization's rules to its members.⁶⁹ The central leadership can disown a member or commander for any significant violation of the rules; for example, in January 2008 they sacked Mullah Mansoor Dadullah for failing to "obey the rules of the Islamic emirate."⁷⁰

The Taliban Securing its Future

The Taliban applies its resources and structures toward its strategic goals. It influences the environment to perpetuate growth in three categories:

- Coercive capabilities—activities in which the threat or direct application of force influences the environment in a way that feeds back into the resources of the Taliban.

- Internal political influence—nonviolent means of affecting the environment, such as developing shadow government structures.

- External political influence—efforts to isolate Afghanistan and its neighbors from external assistance and to spread the Taliban ideology to surrounding neighbor states, in particular Pakistan, in order to control a greater resource base and to continue to expand.

Coercive capabilities. The Taliban's use of war-of-the-flea guerrilla tactics has forced coalition units to spread themselves out over too large an area and to respond to Taliban actions with disproportionate amounts of force, thus causing more damage to the civilian population than to the insurgents.⁷¹

Today's guerrilla strategy reflects a change in Taliban operations. Afghans knew Mullah Omar for his Robin Hood-like actions as a protector of the people in the Taliban's early days.⁷² Now, the Taliban take advantage of the Pashtunwali code's tenet of nanawetey to obtain shelter within the population. The Taliban commander in Helmand province claims, "The people are with us. They give us food, they give us shelter."⁷³ Of course, the shelter may often be coerced rather than freely given, as a report from Ghanzi province suggests: "People wait to speak with their favorite deputy . . . One is a school teacher, the other a member of the municipal council. They don't even dare say their names out of fear of potential reprisals."⁷⁴ In Karabah, "Taliban regime sympathizers rode through the streets of six Karabah district villages with loud speakers, threatening any who cooperated with the Afghan government with

death. For three months, the Taliban have become emboldened, and now they make these ‘visits’ with their faces uncovered. Yet no one has denounced them. Why would they? The last time the villagers pointed out who was responsible for an attack, the perpetrators were released immediately after paying the district chief of police some money.”⁷⁵

Civilian casualties are increasing as the Taliban and coalition forces continue to struggle. According to Human Rights Watch, Taliban attacks caused 699 civilian casualties in 2006.⁷⁶ The data in Table 1 below, compiled by the Afghanistan NGO Security Office, shows the intentional versus collateral damage toll on the civil populace in the first six months of 2007.⁷⁷

The Taliban campaign has driven a wedge between coalition forces and the people, whom coalition forces see as *de facto* supporters of the Taliban. Conversely, the people believe that coalition forces are culturally insensitive, cause unnecessary civilian casualties, and fail to offer appropriate reparations for those casualties. The people then embrace *badal*, increasing passive support for the Taliban and creating a pool of potential new fighters.

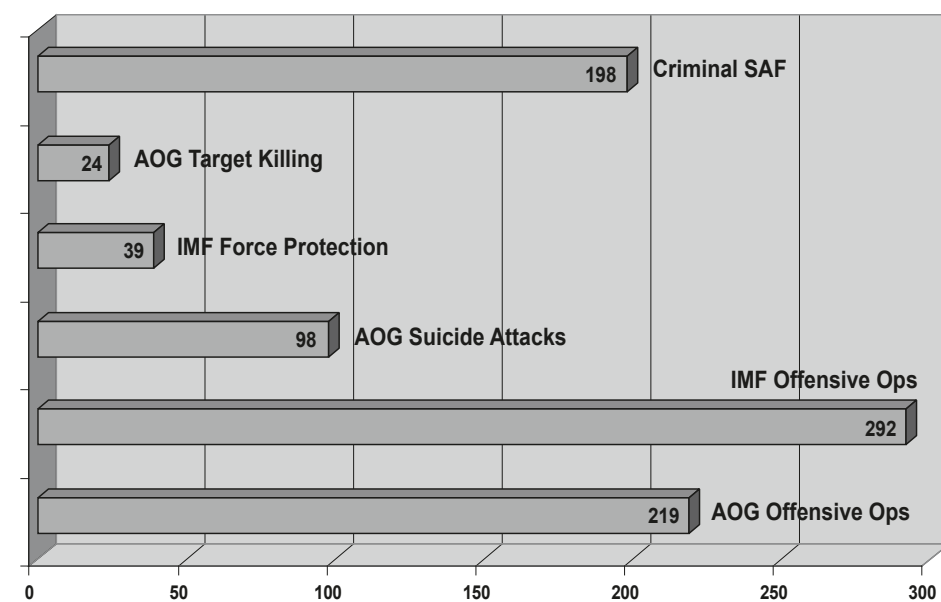
The Taliban’s coercion campaign also fuels popular frustration with the IROA. The NGO Safety Office reported that the first six months of 2007

saw a 50 percent increase in contact between the populace and the Taliban and other armed opposition groups.⁷⁸ Most of these instances were nonlethal, but 60 percent were abductions or attempts to intimidate. Forty percent of the attacks involved direct-fire weapons (rocket-propelled grenades and small arms), assaults, IED attacks, or arson.⁷⁹

The Taliban’s constant gnawing prevents workers and material from reaching far-flung parts of Afghanistan. As one European security official said, “[The people] are concerned that the base level of their lives is not improved, and that’s the challenge that the insurgency provides—delaying the ability of the government to be able to deliver, by keeping certain areas unstable.”⁸⁰ The result of the Taliban’s depredations is disillusionment, anger toward those who promised a better life, and a desire to return to the Taliban to replace frustration with stability.

The Taliban have also stepped up the use of suicide bombers to fortify the movement: since 2006, the number of such attacks has increased remarkably.⁸¹ Produced through the interaction between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the new wave of suicide troops demonstrates the difference between the Taliban’s early Robin Hood tactics and its current disregard for civilians. These human weapons have produced more casualties among the civilian population than among the international security forces.⁸² As a

result, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has accused the Taliban of deliberately targeting civilians in order to undermine the IROA.⁸³ The tactic seems to be working: Afghans now minimize contact with coalition agencies because of the increased risk in going near coalition troops or bases. Of course, the Taliban’s propaganda machine attempts to avoid responsibility for civilian casualties, usually blaming them on the coalition, as a 2007 story run by Al-Jazeera shows:



LEGEND: AOG, Armed Opposition Groups; IMF, International military forces (NATO, U.S.); SAF, Small arms fire

Table 1. Causes of NGO reported casualties.

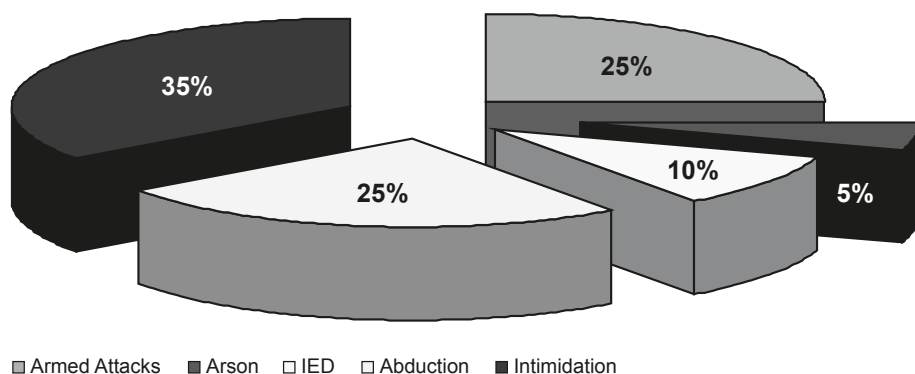


Figure 8. NGO and AOG contact.

“The Taliban have told us that a suicide... [attack was] carried out this morning ... [and] they killed four Italians and injured three others. Their version is that any civilians who were killed died in gunfire, which happened afterwards—they haven’t claimed responsibility for the deaths of the civilians.”⁸⁴ This tactic coerces default support for the Taliban by alienating the population from coalition forces and the Afghan government.

Coercive efforts to indoctrinate Afghan youth target the country’s education system. In 2006, Taliban militants killed 20 teachers and destroyed some 200 schools.⁸⁵ In 2007, they forced another 300 schools to close.⁸⁶ In January 2007, the Taliban said it had put aside one million dollars to establish schools in the six southern provinces of Afghanistan. “[The] Taliban are not against education,” they claimed; rather, “The Taliban want sharia (Islamic) education.”⁸⁷ The group hopes to build a controlled, madrassa-style educational system after destroying all other educational resources. The Taliban is securing a future resource, the people, for years to come.

Internal influences. The Taliban has proven to be a resilient organization. After being ousted from power, it was able to regroup and set up a parallel government. This “shadow government” seeks to expand its power by gaining control over territory and undermining the legitimacy of the IROA.⁸⁸ Former top-ranking Taliban general and current member of the IROA parliament Mullah Abdul Salam Rocketi noted its existence early on: “The whole General Staff of the Taliban resistance is . . . like a real shadow government.”⁸⁹

The Taliban also seem to be infiltrating the legitimate government. Coalition forces noticed this in 2005, when Afghan amnesty programs allowed

Taliban members to rejoin Afghan society and participate in the elections. As one operations officer said:

There were guys on the candidate list that we knew had loose affiliations with the [Taliban] or were facilitators or were in some other way soiled with the stain of the [Taliban] or were on our target list in some way, shape or form... That demonstrated to us that these guys will attempt

to build some kind of shadow government through the legitimate elections so that they can have people in place to take over those positions of responsibility, if and when their way of life and their way of government is reinstitutionalized by collapsing the legitimate government.⁹⁰

While it may be difficult to confirm the true allegiances of returning Taliban members until they choose to reveal them, the perception of wolves in sheep’s clothing in government serves to further undermine the IROA.

Meanwhile, the Taliban is promoting the legitimacy of their shadow government, as proven by their drafting a new Constitution of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in December 2006.⁹¹ The Taliban is making a point of acting as a government in exile, so that their sympathizers in Arab states can more easily justify supporting them.

Regional and international influence. The July 2007 Red Mosque incident in Islamabad demonstrates the Taliban’s ability to influence politics in the region. The militants who imposed Taliban-style sharia law in their Islamabad community sparked an eight-day standoff with government forces, a stalemate that concluded with Pakistani troops storming the complex. In the ensuing melee, 10 soldiers and over 90 militants were killed.⁹² This police action caused a wave of civil unrest and sparked calls for President Musharraf to resign.

More recently, the assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto has shown the level of interest the Taliban takes in the future of Pakistan. Both the Pakistani government and the CIA have placed responsibility for the assassina-

tion on Baitulla Mehsud, commander of the Taliban Movement of Pakistan.⁹³ Mehsud is reported to have pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar, whose ideological beliefs he shares.⁹⁴ This extension of Taliban influence to Pakistan demonstrates the organization's successful attempt to expand regionally.

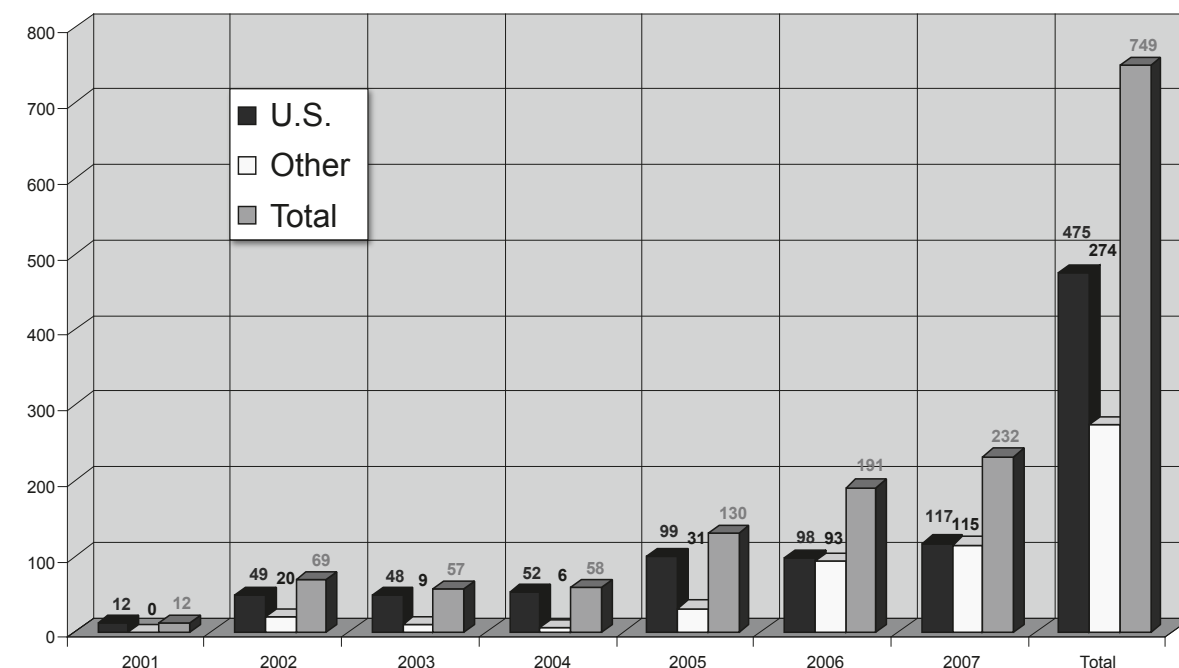
The Taliban's international influence was also evident in the July 2007 abduction and apparent execution of two German nationals involved in a dam project (along with five Afghans) and the kidnapping of a busload of South Korean missionaries. Taliban members claim they executed the Germans after Germany ignored a deadline to withdraw its 3,000 troops from Afghanistan. The Korean hostages faced a similar fate when the Taliban demanded Korea withdraw its 200 troops from the region. After the Taliban killed two of the Koreans, the South Korean government gave in to the Taliban's demand and agreed to pull its personnel out of Afghanistan. (The remaining hostages were released.)⁹⁵

These campaigns benefit the Taliban in several ways. In the wake of the Red Mosque incident and continued student protests, pressure on Pakistan to give in to demands for Taliban-style religious rule increased, producing more public support for the Taliban and a greater pool of potential recruits. With the hostage-taking and killings, the Taliban

exposed the government's inability to protect foreigners and showed it could dictate terms to national governments.

The influence the Taliban exerts can also be seen in the recent rift between the U.S. and its coalition partners over shared burdens in Afghanistan. With their patient tactics, the Taliban are testing the national wills of coalition states and the strength of the alliance as the mission in Afghanistan lengthens.

Recently, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates criticized NATO's effort against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. Gates told the *Los Angeles Times* that coalition forces in the south do not know how to fight a counterinsurgency and may be contributing to the escalation of violence.⁹⁶ The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Canada, whose troops have endured much of the fighting in southern Afghanistan, protested Gates' remarks.⁹⁷ Canada's National Democratic Party leader, Jack Layton, said that the remarks could be the tipping point that drives Canada out of Afghanistan. A NATO spokesman responded, "It's not helpful when there's media speculation about divisions between allies. It's even worse when there is division between allies" (although he added, "But I don't think there is").⁹⁸ Growing casualties, too, are taking a toll on the alliance members' willingness to supply troops.⁹⁹ (See Table 2.)



NOTE: The casualty figures shown here do not include the casualties of Pakistani forces which are believed to be over 1100 KIA to date.

Table 2. Coalition deaths by year.

Obviously, the Taliban understand that the insurgent “flea” need not defeat his adversary, but merely outlast his will to continue to scratch.

Pressed to address what the future might hold for the Taliban and Afghanistan, this much seems clear: the Taliban are becoming self-sustaining by producing effects that feed back into their resource base. Thus, the movement is capable of surviving and, in

the absence of a U.S. and NATO presence, eventually ruling the Pashtun-dominated region of Afghanistan and spreading its sphere of influence into the FATA and other regions of Pakistan. There is a clear need to address this problem in a more coherent manner. If we do not, the Taliban has the potential to unleash a new wave of terror—more attacks like 9/11, Barcelona, or London—across the world. **MR**

NOTES

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2. “Madrasa” (Arabic: مدرسة) is the Arabic word for any type of school, secular or religious (of any religion). In this article, “madrasa” will refer to Islamic religious seminaries in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

3. “Mujahideen” (Arabic: مجاهدين, literally, “strugglers”) is a term for Muslims fighting in any type of struggle. Mujahid and its plural, mujahideen, come from the same Arabic root as “jihad” (“struggle”). A warlord is a powerful person who commands an armed force loyal to him, not to the government; as a result, he enjoys de facto control of a sub-national area. Warlords and regional strongmen have been a constant characteristic of Afghan history.

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8. For a detailed history of the Great Game see Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha Globe, 1994).

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13. Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan—the Bear Trap: the Defeat of a Superpower* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2001), 159.

14. Katzman, 3. See also “The Taliban,” *Program for Culture and Conflict Studies*, <www.nps.edu/Programs/CCS/Docs/Pubs/The%20Taliban.pdf> (27 November 2007).

15. “Wahhabism” (Arabic: الوهابية) is a branch of Islam practiced by those who follow the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab, after whom the movement is named. The writings of such scholars as Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya influenced Ibn Abdul Wahhab, who reintroduced Sharia (Islamic) law to the Arabian Peninsula. The term “Wahhabi” (*Wahhābiya*) is rarely used by the people it describes. The currently preferred term is “Salafism” from *Salaf as-Salih*, the “pious predecessors,” as propagated mainly by Ibn Taymiyya, his students Ibn Al Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and later by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab and his followers.

16. Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan* (London and Karachi: Oxford University Press; New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1998), 22-35.

17. The cloak of the Prophet Mohammed was locked in a crypt in the royal mausoleum at Kandahar and, according to popular myth, could only be touched by a true *Amir-ul-Momineen* (Leader of the Faithful). For details of the event, see Johnson and Mason, 80, and Norimitsu Onishi, “A Tale of the Mullah and Muhammad’s Amazing Cloak,” *New York Times*, 19 December 2001, <query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F04EEDB123EF93AA25751C1A9679C8B63> (28 November 2007).

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19. Joseph A. Raelin, “The Myth of Charismatic Leaders,” *T + D* (1 March 2003): 46, <www.proquest.com/> (2 December 2007).

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23. Ibid., 122.

24. The term “tribe,” as used in this article, refers to “localized groups in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organization, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins) and have been politically unified at least for much of their history.” Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, “Tribes and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005,” *Crisis States Working Papers* 2, no. 7 (September 2006), 2, <www.crisisstates.com/download/wp/wpSeries2/wp7.2.pdf>.

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26. A *jirga* (Urdu: جرگه) is a tribal assembly of elders that makes decisions by consensus. They are most common in Afghanistan and among the Pashtun in Pakistan. For details of the *jirga* tradition, see Ali Wardak, *Jirga—A Traditional Mechanism of Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan*, <unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN017434.pdf>; and Mumtaz Ali Bangash, “Jirga: Speedy Justice of Elders. What is Not Decided in the Jirga Will Never be Decided by Bloodshed,” *Khyber Gateway*, <www.khyber.org/culture/jirga/jirgas.shtml>.

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39. Ibid., 22.

40. Ibid., 21.

41. Ibid., 12.

42. Ibid., 19.

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46. CIA—the World Factbook 2007.

47. House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on Afghanistan, “Afghanistan: The Rise of the Narco-Taliban: Testimony of Congressman Mark Kirk,” 2007, <www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/kir021507.pdf> (29 November 2007).

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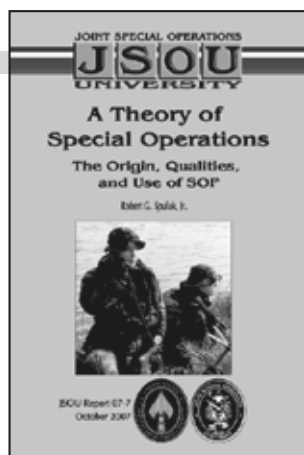
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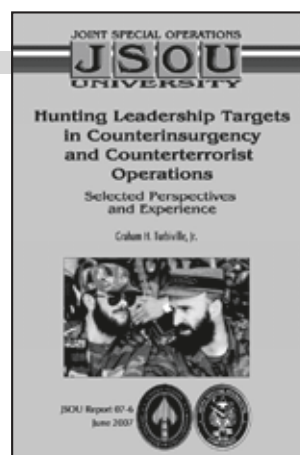
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